ONCE again the natal origins of Gustavus Vassa, the African, are a matter for debate. In the early 1790s, short pieces in two British papers questioned whether the author of *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* was indeed, as he claimed in his memoir, a native of Africa. The articles in question, unburdened by evidence, asserted that Vassa had been born in the Danish West Indies. Vassa considered the charge a scurrilous one and quickly mobilized friends and allies to quash it. The editor of the most judicious and useful modern edition of *The Interesting Narrative* has raised similar questions concerning Vassa's birthplace. This time, however, the questions are based firmly in the documentary record. Calling explicit attention to a too-long neglected portion of Vassa's baptismal record and pointing to an uncovered ship muster—both of which list South Carolina as Vassa's birthplace—Vincent Carretta has offered the following puzzle concerning the now canonical author: "we must ask why, if he had indeed been born Olaudah Equiano in Africa, he chose to suppress these facts." \(^1\)

Carretta's charge is a reasonable one and it deserves a reasonable response, yet queries concerning the origins of Vassa also naturally lead to larger and more pressing questions concerning not simply Vassa's origins, but the origins of his memoir. Questions concerning Vassa's place of birth are mostly pressing because they affect the light in which his *Interesting Narrative* is viewed and interpreted. Accordingly, Carretta has pointed out that "from the available evidence, one could argue that the author of *The Interesting Narrative* invented an African identity rather than reclaimed one. If so," Carretta continues, "Equiano's literary achievements have been underestimated." \(^2\)

Examining a literary aspect of Vassa's *Interesting Narrative* can help address questions concerning the author, his book, and the place of both in the ongoing study of the African diaspora. The ways that Vassa wrote about his ethnic origins and racial identity in his memoir—the ethnographic language of *The Interesting Narrative*—introduce important evidence into the debate about the origins of Equiano and speak powerfully to related questions concerning the sources of his recollections.

Vassa, a close study of his narrative makes clear, wrote about "Eboe" (his eighteenth-century spelling) and about his Igboness in an ambiguous, indecisive, and sometimes quite confused manner. But rather than indicating an unfamiliarity
with being Igbo, Vassa's apparently incomplete grasp and enigmatic expression of his Igboness actually suggests someone deeply familiar with and in some way affected by the social and political geography of the Biafran interior. Further, Vassa's discourse on his racial Africanness almost perfectly captures and expresses a black transatlantic perspective of someone whose life was framed by the kind of transoceanic migration that was the slave trade. Whatever Vassa's origins, the ethnographic language of his memoir supplies good internal evidence that the origins of The Interesting Narrative lie decidedly in the Biafran interior and were profoundly African. These conclusions are not without consequence as far as the question of Vassa's birthplace is concerned. They also inform, in the end, a set of caveats concerning a current trend in American slavery studies: the scholarly inclination to write about African slaves as members of various African countries or nations such as Vassa's Eboe.

For a volume that has become a touchstone of historical scholarship on eighteenth-century Igbo life, forms of the word Igbo appear only a handful of times in The Interesting Narrative, all confined to the book's first chapter. In the first edition of the book, Vassa very specifically named the province, or district, of the kingdom of Benin in which he was born: Eboe. A few pages later, he used a form of the term to refer to traders who passed through the market near his town, "stout, mahogany-coloured men from the south west of us" whom Vassa's elders called "Oye-Eboe." He then used the term in a sentence about the predilections of American slave owners, writing that "the West-India planters prefer the slaves of Benin or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea, for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity, and zeal." Next, after praising the physiognomy of the people of his homeland, he informed his readers that "natives of Eboe now in London" could be examined as proof of this particular point. Lastly, he used a form of Igbo in a discussion about the cultural similarities and a possible historical relationship between Jews and his own people, writing that he would not try to explain what remained an obvious difference between the two groups ("As to the difference of colour between the Eboan Africans and the modem Jews, I shall not presume to account for it").

As far as the scope and meaning of being Igbo was concerned, the five instances where Vassa used the term in his Interesting Narrative were as mystifying as they were clarifying. His most definitive use of Igbo, for example—when he wrote that he was born in a section of the kingdom of Benin called Eboe—was also the usage in which he apparently had the least confidence as he struck it from all other editions of the book for which he had oversight. His thoughts about the preferences of West Indian planters and their fondness for the "slaves of Benin or Eboe" is a nearly complete inversion of what many American planters thought of Eboe slaves. Vassa wrote with greater clarity about the natives of Eboe then in London, yet the confidence he displayed writing about Eboe in the British capital cannot help but highlight the difficulty he had writing about Eboe in western Africa. It is as if Eboe was a notion that Vassa best understood in the context of the diaspora. And if it is not significant, it is surely suggestive that in the second and subsequent editions of his memoir—after Vassa thought better of writing that he had been born in a district of Benin called Eboe—a variant of the term Igbo first appeared in The Interesting Narrative, not in a statement about the people of Equiano's homeland, but in a discourse on a socially and phenotypically different group of people from beyond, the Oye-Eboe to whom Vassa expressed
more enmity than kinship.6

Vassa's recourse to the term Eboe in The Interesting Narrative was limited and his meaning, when he used the term, was enigmatic. How, then, did his autobiography come to be thought of as a critical source of information about eighteenth-century Igbo life?7 Though Vassa referred to things Igbo only sparingly, he wrote movingly and at length about his country, his nation, and his countrymen and -women. Readers of his memoir have tended to take Igbo as the obvious antecedent for such terms.

Without question this way of reading was sometimes what Vassa intended. After the extended ethnography of his memoir's first chapter, for example, he begged the reader's pardon for having spent so much time on an "account of the manners and customs of my country." Yet Vassa also used country and nation more generally. At moments he used country generically as if waving his hand over a rural vastness. At other times he used forms of country and nation in a geopolitical sense as a way to refer to polities and places in Africa, often without actually naming them, in ways similar to how his British contemporaries would have referred to the political geography of Europe. Vassa's first use of country and nation in The Interesting Narrative, when he informs his readers that the following description of the town of his birth should also be taken as a fitting description of its environs, is apropos. Wrote Vassa: "The manners and government of a people who have little commerce with other countries are generally very simple; and the history of what passes in one family or village may serve as a specimen of the whole nation."8

In keeping with this sort of usage, Vassa also employed the terms as a way of writing about the cultural and ethnic practices that, ideally, were indicative of the differences between people who hailed from different countries. When describing a scene in Jamaica concerning how the island's slaves took advantage of opportunities for recreation, Vassa wrote: "When I came to Kingston, I was surprised to see the number of Africans, who were assembled together on Sundays; particularly at a large commodious place called Spring Path. Here each different nation of Africa meet and dance, after the manner of their own country. They still retain most of their native customs: they bury their dead, and put victuals, pipes, and tobacco, and other things in the grave with the corpse, in the same manner as in Africa."9 These uses of country and nation are fairly straightforward, and their straightforwardness indicates how and why readers of Vassa's narrative have felt comfortable expanding his infrequent use of Eboe to encompass these terms as well. At moments in The Interesting Narrative this way of reading country and nation as Eboe was clearly Vassa's intention.

At other moments, however, what Vassa meant by country and nation greatly complicated or was at odds with the rather clear-cut connotations previously considered. There is, for instance, a critical shading in the ways that Vassa used country and nation in their geopolitical senses. Though he used the terms in the relatively expansive ways already illustrated, country and nation as polities presumably encompassing a variety of settlements, Vassa sometimes used the words to refer to more limited and ambiguously defined tracts. When he described the place in Africa where he settled for a time after his initial kidnapping, Vassa suggested that the place was new and outside the boundaries of his former home: "At length, after many days travelling, during which I had often changed masters," Vassa recorded, "I got into the hands of a chieftain, in a very pleasant country."
But if this new abode was in a different country from his own, it is not altogether clear how or why Vassa made the distinction. The people "spoke exactly the same language" as he did and the geography of settlement was not dissimilar to that which prevailed around his father's house. All the same Vassa insisted on writing about it as a distinct place.

Vassa also spent considerable space describing the town of Tinmah, where he was sold after his sojourn with a chieftain-smith to whom he was earlier enslaved. Yet whatever Tinmah's similarities to his home, Vassa was likewise fairly clear that Tinmah lay outside of his country and that its people were not his people. Nowhere is this ethnographic difference clearer than in the comparative perspective he struck in presenting the place. Vassa could not help but describe the customs and environs of Tinmah, even when they were identical, as far as he could tell, to the ways of the world around his father's house, with a distant and alienating "they," reserving the natal "we" and "our" for the town from which he had been plucked months earlier. "They had also the very same customs as we," he wrote of Tinmah, thereby managing to convey the significant similarities between the one place and the other while expressing at an arguably more basic level something of the cognitive distance that continued to separate the two places in Vassa's mind.

Early on in The Interesting Narrative, Vassa deployed nation several times in a similar fashion, in ways that conveyed practical similarity but significant cognitive distance. In discussing how he managed to effectively communicate with people as he was carried farther and farther away from his home, Vassa recalled, "From the time I left my own nation I always found somebody that understood me till I came to the sea coast" because "the languages of different nations did not totally differ, nor were they so copious as those of the Europeans, particularly the English." Vassa was emphatic that his travels through the Biafran interior moved him out of his own nation. Even further, he grasped when his movements pushed him across the boundaries of still additional nations. Nonetheless The Interesting Narrative remains quite opaque about the criteria by which Vassa discerned these passages.

Clearly, language and culture were not the determining factors. Vassa understood that fundamental boundaries could and did exist among groups of people who spoke nearly identical languages and who shared many similar customs. Nowhere is this drawing of boundaries clearer than in his recounting of his arrival at the Biafran littoral and then at the coast proper, where he granted that different nations divided people of like custom as much as they divided people of dissimilar custom. Wrote Vassa: "All the nations and people I had hitherto passed through resembled our own in their manners, customs and language: but I came at length to a country, the inhabitants of which differed from us in all those particulars." And of his entire ordeal from the kidnapping at his father's compound to his arrival at the coast, passing among people who very much resembled his own and among others who did not, Vassa summarized: "Thus I continued to travel, sometimes by land, sometimes by water, through different countries, and various nations, till, at the end of six or seven months after I had been kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast."

The opacity of these uses of country and nation distinguishes them from other instances in The Interesting Narrative where Vassa used nation and country to call to mind for his part of western Africa a geopolitical landscape not dissimilar to
eighteenth-century western Europe, with which his readers would have been familiar. Whereas Vassa distinguished between his homeland and the place where he was enslaved to the chieftain-smith as different countries, there is evidence in what he wrote about the language, society, and culture of the two places that he did not mean to suggest that moving between the two was analogous to the difference between, say, England and France (or England and Scotland for that matter). The boundaries and differences he suggested were more subtle, more restrained, yet important enough to merit continuous mention.

So what exactly did Vassa mean by these particular uses of country and nation? In Vassa’s mind it is likely that the land of his birth and the land of the chieftain-smith by whom he was later enslaved were different countries because he had traveled many days between them. They were different countries because they were not obviously connected as settlements where people built compounds, farmed, or gathered in common. They were different countries, in all likelihood, because they were different towns. This contrast is infused in the sense of country that emerges from those passages in The Interesting Narrative where Vassa recounted his travels as if he were a film director using time lapse and jump cuts to move his narrative forward: "I was again sold, and carried through a number of places, till, after travelling a considerable time, I came to a town called Tinmah... All the nations and people I had hitherto passed through resembled our own... but I came at length to a country... Thus I continued to travel, sometimes by land, sometimes by water, through different countries, and various nations." In The Interesting Narrative, sometimes a nation or country was, quite simply, a town (a point that is significant for measuring Vassa’s probable connection to the Biafran interior).11

In addition to using country and nation in the various ethnic and geopolitical senses previously outlined, Vassa also employed the terms racially. This use of the terms was especially the case when he related quintessentially Atlantic events and experiences. For instance, when Vassa petitioned the bishop of London for support to be sent to Africa as a Christian missionary, he referred to the continent at large as a country. Describing himself to the bishop, Vassa wrote the following in the first full paragraph of his plea: "That your memorialist is a native of Africa, and has a knowledge of the manners and customs of the inhabitants of that country." Similarly, when Vassa was appointed commissary of an expedition that eventually landed several hundred black settlers—Afro-Americans, Africans, and South Asians—in Sierra Leone, he embraced the whole crew as his countrymen. He used the same racially freighted sense of country in an abolitionist petition addressed to Britain’s Queen Charlotte in 1788, writing, "I supplicate your Majesty’s compassion for millions of my African countrymen, who groan under the lash of tyranny in the West Indies."15 Especially when he related events following his political maturation as an abolitionist, Vassa imbued country with clear racial and diasporic overtones.

Vassa also used nation and country with arresting protoracial inflections, particularly in the book’s recounting of his initial acclimation to the Atlantic world. Vassa’s account of his first days aboard a European slave ship offers an example. After boarding the ship and experiencing and witnessing a torrent of horrors—his being flogged for refusing to eat, among them—Vassa recalled that he eventually found below deck, "some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind."16 This use of "my own nation" does not project the same
stark racial connotations surrounding Vassa's use of country later in his memoir. Yet it also differs from Vassa's previous uses of country and nation as a way to define the politics, cultural and otherwise, that characterized the parts of western Africa he knew apparently from birth and the parts he apparently came to know as a slave traded through the Biafran interior. When Vassa recounted his ordeal aboard the ship that carried him to the Americas, he began to use country and nation in ways that privileged linguistic intelligibility, in degrees, as the primary boundaries of the community to which his use of nation and country were meant to allude.

When Equiano first found some of his "own nation" below deck, the nature of the relationship between them was largely and frantically communicative. It is not insignificant that he quickly "inquired of these what was to be done with us?" Their ability to communicate clearly and effectively with him ("they gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them") was calming in ways that indicated to Equiano that he had found a community of men and women on whom he could depend (if only because, first and foremost, they were the people with whom he could most easily communicate).11

At the same time, the context and repetition of this communication could not help but solidify, refine, and invest further meaning in the nature of the relationship that existed between captives who could most easily understand one another. This process is evident during another moment at which Equiano's fear and anxiety was at its worse: he witnessed a white crewman flogged to the point of death and then tossed overboard. Following the incident Equiano despaired what the crew of the ship had in store for him if they treated each other with such violence. Afterward, as Vassa put it, "I could not help expressing my fears and apprehensions to some of my countrymen." The exchange that followed was remarkable for the extent to which it indicated the importance of communication to the formation and maintenance of community aboard European Guineaships. "I asked them if these people had no country, but lived in this hollow place the ship? they told me they did not, but came from a distant one. 'Then,' said I, 'how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?' 'They told me ... I then asked ... I was told ... 'And why,' said I ... they answered ... I asked ... they told me."12

Later, when Vassa recounted his arrival in the Americas and his subsequent departure from the slave ship, he continued to use country in ways that emphasized linguistic community compared with the ways he had used the term in describing his previous sojourn through the Biafran interior. When Equiano and his fellow captives were first landed at Barbados, he knew the crew's promise to them that they would soon "see many of our country people" was correct because "sure enough, soon after we were landed, there came to us Africans of all languages." And once the ship was all but emptied in Bridgetown, except for a few refuse slaves (Equiano among them), Vassa wrote of the deep emptiness he then experienced in a way that made it clear that the bonds he felt with his countrymen shipboard were bonds founded first on ease of communication. Of his situation after most of the ship's cargo had been sold, Vassa lamented, "I now totally lost the small remains of comfort I had enjoyed in conversing with my countrymen."13

Vassa, therefore, used Eboe, country, and nation in several ways throughout his Interesting Narrative: sometimes rather straightforwardly, sometimes with fascinating subtlety, sometimes in manners that generated striking contrasts, and
sometimes, it must be admitted, in ways that were simply confounding. The stores of eighteenth-century English could be invoked to account for a good deal of this variety. In eighteenth-century social and political discourse, nation was every bit as malleable and expansive as it appears in *The Interesting Narrative*. In this sense Vassa was a participant in the larger, meandering project of working out the modern meaning of nation. Even so the nuanced, shifting, and sometimes baffling ways that Vassa deployed Eboe, country, and nation begs analysis and explanation that goes beyond locating him as an exemplar of the times.

It is a simple matter, for instance, to reconcile Vassa's occasional use of country and countrymen to connote linguistic community with the way the word has been used in Western thought during the past few centuries to refer to similar kinds of human and physical boundaries. But even then an important question of context and agency remains: why did Vassa refrain from using country in ways that privileged linguistic community when he described life in the Biafran interior yet embrace it so fully when he described his experiences aboard a European slave ship? Likewise it is not too difficult to account for differences in Vassa's use of Eboe—as a political entity versus a cultural category, for instance—but such work still leaves the question of why Vassa was so cautious in his overall use of the term.

Pursuing these kinds of questions reveals, ultimately, a significant point about Vassa's use of Eboe, country, and nation: the ethnographic language of *The Interesting Narrative* is itself evidence of how African captives responded cognitively to the challenges of their migrations. Addressing a few questions concerning idiosyncrasies apparent in Vassa's use of Eboe, country, and nation makes this point abundantly plain.

Why did Vassa employ Eboe so sparingly and handle it so indecisively when he used it? In all likelihood the reason was because Vassa was himself confounded by Eboe, particularly as it applied to the political and social geography of the Biafran interior. Surveying the documentary record and secondary literature on Igbo self-understanding in the region suggests the sources of Vassa's apparent uncertainty. For the eighteenth, nineteenth, and much of the twentieth centuries, there is simply very little positive evidence that men and women in the Biafran interior understood or embraced Igbo as a self-conscious expression of their personal or corporate identity.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Reverend Sigismund Koelle, who compiled a comparative vocabulary of African languages, paid particular attention to this point in his *Polyglotta Africana*. Koelle, who was based in the colony of Sierra Leone when Great Britain was actively engaged in the suppression of the Atlantic slave trade, interviewed African captives who had been emancipated at sea by British patrols and who were later landed at Freetown (the colonial capital of Sierra Leone). In the linguistic work based on his interviews, when Koelle attended to what he referred to as the Igbo dialects of the Niger Delta languages, he began with a rather startling observation. Though it was customary that Africans "who have come from the Bight are called Êbos," the reverend ascertained through conversation with said Igbos that "they never had heard" the name until their settlement at Sierra Leone. Instead the philologist's informants claimed a number of different affiliations. Among other things they called themselves Isoama, Mbofia, Isiele, and Aro. Further, even seventy years ago, colonial officers and anthropologists working in southeastern Nigeria sometimes
encountered a similar conundrum when they, too, went looking for the Igbo. In the 1930s a colonial anthropologist sent to assess the social and political structure of an Igbo subtribe reported back that his subjects "declare that they are not Igbo and refer to all the other Igbo speaking peoples as Igbo." Evidence from the Biafran interior concerning the ways that Igbo was used across the region suggests further why Vassa may have found the term problematic: in the twentieth century, though there were few, if any, communities who styled themselves Igbo, the rather antagonistic "Eaters of Ibo" prevailed as a name taken by age-set organization throughout the region. The existence of the title is important because it suggests that, though there were few communities in the Biafran interior that used Igbo to describe themselves, there were numerous groups who applied the term to others. There is additional evidence, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that Igbo was used as an insult and as an expression of contempt in the Biafran interior. Along the Niger various riverine communities used Igbo to describe and vilify peoples living behind the river's course as well as those residing in the adjacent uplands: "Those who do not wash." West of the Niger, the word was an epithet for the peoples dwelling just on the other side of the waterway. Among the inhabitants of Onitsha and Nri, the term was used in elevating themselves from surrounding polities that lacked well-developed notions of kingship, as in the condescending though hardly straightforward proverb "Igbo have no king." It should come as no surprise, then, that Vassa was so uncertain in his use of Eboe. His inelegance was evidence that the concept was a slippery one for him. And slippery it should have been. If Vassa was indeed born Equiano in Africa, it is quite likely that he grew up having never used the term to refer to himself personally or to his society more generally. The expurgation Vassa made following the first printing of The Interesting Narrative—where he no longer claimed definitely to have hailed from a district of Benin called Eboe—and his subsequent spare use of the term throughout his memoir (whatever the confusion surrounding those uses), should be understood, then, as an implicit indication on Vassa's part that the boundaries of Eboe could not be written about as easily as his friends wrote about the former kingdoms then comprising Great Britain or in the same way that they held forth on England's counties. Abolitionist Granville Sharp was certain that he had been born in Durham; Africans from the Biafran interior could not be so certain, at least not in the same way, that they had been born in Eboe. The Interesting Narrative showed signs of this indecision.

Differences in the ways that Vassa used country and nation in his memoir similarly reflect someone who developed and maintained contrasting notions of his origins and identity (personal and corporate) over the span of his life. Vassa tended to use country and nation, rather idiosyncratically, to mean town or settlement when he related his long trek from the Biafran interior to the coast at the start of his narrative. Yet he also employed much more expansive and racialized uses of these terms. When he wrote of his desire to go to western Africa as a missionary, for example, he wrote of all of Africa as his country and referred to all Africans and slaves as his countrymen. The differences between these two uses is remarkable because the contrasts document the richness of perspective of someone who could not help but portray his world in the several and varying ways that he had come to understand it over the course of a life lived in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Vassa's uses of country and nation, that is, were
profoundly historical, reflecting at once a deep experience, vicarious or otherwise, with the world of the eighteenth-century Biafran interior and attesting to an equally full socialization within the exigencies of the African diaspora and the British Empire.22

The way that Vassa used country and nation to refer to towns and settlements in the first chapter of his narrative, for instance, coincides well with what is known about the ways the peoples of the Biafran interior have tended, historically, to convey the social and cultural geography of their surroundings. According to traditions collected and studies made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Biafran interior was historically dotted with hundreds of independent polities, best referred to as village groups. In the main these village groups were arrays of smaller settlements where ties of kith, kin, and proximity informed political and economic cooperation, as well as a certain corporate identity. Village groups themselves divided into smaller settlements that were, in turn, sets of individual, patrilocally connected one to the other by a series of paths.23

Historically, an abiding localism centered on the geography of the village group characterized society and culture in the Biafran interior. The village group, with its land, its politics, its rituals, and its dialect, was the largest social unit in which people ordinarily sensed and created significant ties of corporate association and obligation.24 Accordingly, it should come as little surprise that the peoples of the Biafran interior have tended to organize the social and cultural geography of their world in terms of "we" and "they," with "we" referring to either relations or their village group and its components, and "they" serving to denote everybody else.25

To its inhabitants, the Biafran hinterland was a patchwork of polities, ethnicities, cultures, ecologies, and professions; people across the region tended to refer to themselves and to others accordingly. Along the lower Niger, for example, the inhabitants conceived of themselves politically by their village groups, Onitsha people and Aboh people. These groups also referred to peoples in their purview who likewise lived along the Niger as Olu, riverine people. Elsewhere in the Biafran interior, there were Enugu and Aniocha, people from the hills and people who live on the eroded soils, respectively, and Nduazu and Umudioka, blacksmiths and carvers. There were communities that situated themselves in relation to their ancestors, as with the village groups Ngwa-Ukwu and Onicha-Ukwu.26 Consequently, when Vassa wrote of traveling through innumerable countries and nations on his trek from the Biafran interior to the coast, his English prose translated very well central ideas in the indigenous political and social geography of the region. At moments, quite simply, Vassa was remarkably adept at putting himself in the mind of a boy from the Biafran interior.

Just as Vassa's uses of country and nation at the beginning of his memoir reflect the perspective of a boy from the Biafran interior, his racialized uses of these terms toward the end of his narrative reflect how an African who had lived many years in the eighteenth-century Atlantic metropolitan world of plantations, port cities, and sailing ships would have learned to articulate the ties and potential ties of blackness. As quite a few scholars of Afro-America have demonstrated, out of the social and cultural exigencies of Atlantic slavery, Afro-Christianity, and abolitionism, African slaves and their descendants over time came to domesticate and contribute to the language of race and racial identity.27 The ways Vassa used country and nation at the end of his narrative are but one more example of the
There was a bridge between such racialized notions of country and nation and the circumscribed versions that dot the first chapters of Vassa's memoir. His descriptions of the cultural and social politics of the Biafran interior do not privilege linguistic intelligibility as an important marker of cultural or social difference. Yet his descriptions of slave society aboard European Guineamen and in the Americas most assuredly do, and this shift suggests the source of the transformation in the way that the author looked at the world.

Bridge and transformation, however, are misleading terms. The prime importance of acknowledging differences in the ways that Vassa used country and nation is not to document a movement or evolution of his ideas concerning those terms. There was no such evolution, at least not in the common way in which evolution is understood: *The Interesting Narrative* does not move from one understanding of country and nation to another. The significance of the contrasts between the ways Vassa used country and nation, and the significance of his slightly confused and hesitant use of Eboe, too, is that they record the multiple ways that the book simultaneously presents its author's sense of origins and community. At times *The Interesting Narrative* presents an author whose understanding of himself in the world appears firmly based in the experiences of a youth raised in the Biafran interior. At other times it presents an author whose self-consciousness was quite obviously affected by a long time in the British Atlantic world. At other moments, still, the book offers a protagonist whose self-awareness is clearly indicative of someone intimately familiar with and socialized within and between Africa, the Americas, and Europe.

The ethnographic language of *The Interesting Narrative* reflects, in uncanny ways, a deep connection to the social consequences of enslavement in the Biafran interior. It likewise captures, with notable subtlety, some of the racializing forces at play in the wider African diaspora. These findings hold implications for current debates concerning the nativity of Equiano: the ways Vassa used Eboe, country, and nation in his memoir speak directly, though not indubitably, to the matter of his origins. In addition Vassa's ethnographic language addresses a question just beyond the matter of Equiano's birthplace: Vassa's deployment of Eboe, country, and nation speaks quite powerfully to the question of the origins and sources of *The Interesting Narrative* itself. Contemplating, respectively, what Vassa's uses of Eboe, country, and nation suggest about himself and about his memoir if the author hailed from South Carolina and what they suggest if he was indeed born in western Africa clarifies these points.

A great deal about the ethnographic language of *The Interesting Narrative* supports Vassa's claim that he hailed from the Biafran interior in western Africa; it also addresses a significant point about the origins of Vassa's memoir itself; particularly when the changes Vassa made between the first and subsequent editions of the book concerning his birthplace are again considered. The passage Vassa penned and then altered concerning the relationship between the kingdom of Benin and his own homeland raises an important point concerning the authorship of *The Interesting Narrative* when the question is posed: why did Vassa make this change? The change as already indicated worked to line up the facts of Vassa's narrative with the facts of life in the eighteenth-century Biafran interior. Yet it is also worth reflecting on why Vassa made the change in a more practical sense; it is worth considering the impetus behind the change. What was it, exactly, that
persuaded Vassa to align his memoir more faithfully to the political geography of the Biafran interior?

Perhaps Vassa came to the realization on his own and acted simply to correct an error that had, despite his best efforts, slipped into the first edition of his book. But given Vassa's professed age when he left his father's compound and his admittedly tenuous grasp on some aspects of political life in his homeland (to say nothing of the possibility that Vassa was not born in Africa), it is just as likely that that change was encouraged the same way most reconsiderations come to nonfiction writing: via the questions and responses of interested interlocutors. Accordingly, at this point, the ethnographic language of The Interesting Narrative casts a dim yet suggestive light on the ways in which Vassa's memoir probably contained not only his own recollections of the Biafran interior but also the corporate knowledge of Vassa's friends and acquaintances, as well. In this sense the ethnographic language of The Interesting Narrative suggests that, even if Vassa spent his first decade in the Biafran interior, his memoir itself may have still been even more firmly rooted in the region than Vassa was.

But what if the author of The Interesting Narrative did not hail from western Africa? If Vassa was born in South Carolina, then, first and foremost, Carretta is quite on target to suggest that the literary achievements of Vassa's book have been vastly underappreciated. In terms of the research and preparation that went into The Interesting Narrative, it is clear from Vassa's own notes that he depended on various historical and geographical sources for parts of his memoir. The ethnographic language of The Interesting Narrative suggests further that among the book's signal accomplishments must be counted Vassa's domestication and presentation of key aspects of the social psychology of the slave trade from the Biafran interior. For a man who did not himself experience the trade, such a feat would have been the product of prodigious listening, with an incredibly sympathetic ear, to those who experienced the trauma. A South Carolinian Vassa would have had to develop a prose style and documentary instinct sensitive enough to capture and retain how accounts of enslavement from the Biafran interior contained, in key words and phrases, a map of the human consequences of the slave trade, in such stories' use of we and they, for example, in their description of the landscape, and in their problematic grasp of the term Igbo.

A documentary accomplishment on this level suggests significant research and careful writing, but it also implies a deep and abiding connection to those to whom the stories Vassa told in his memoir actually belonged. If Vassa's language was a recounting of the words and experiences of Africans from the Biafran interior, then his internalization of their accounts should be carefully considered by historians committed to exploring Vassa's social world because they shed light on a rather underdocumented aspect of Vassa's life: the quality and extent of his interactions with Africans and Afro-Americans.

Throughout The Interesting Narrative, Vassa paid greatest attention to the connections he had and built with non-African friends, foes, and acquaintances. The ethnographic language of the book suggests, however, a great deal about what Vassa frequently let go unwritten: the depth and consequence of the author's relationships with the Africans and Afro-Americans who inhabit the book often only in passing. Though the bulk of The Interesting Narrative documents Vassa's Englishness, the backstory contained in the book's ethnographic language suggests much about the nature of Vassa's relationships to those who had experienced the
slave trade. If Vassa originally hailed from South Carolina, the ethnographic language of The Interesting Narrative offers strong evidence that the author's self-given appellation, "The African," was hardly ill considered. It represented, rather, a deep and abiding connection to Africans in the Americas, one that confounds, in Vassa's case, the social and cultural differences that terms such as African and Afro-American are often meant to express. Whether Vassa was born in South Carolina or western Africa, the ethnographic language of The Interesting Narrative clearly indicates that the origins of Vassa's memoir were deeply rooted in western Africa.

The ways Vassa used Eboe, country, and nation in his memoir also speak to scholars engaged in the ongoing project of documenting and theorizing the relationships among enslavement, transatlantic migration, and the substance of black society and culture in the Americas. Specifically, Vassa's ethnographic language has implications for slavery studies' turn toward studying slaves as members of particular African nations, nations such as Vassa's Eboe. The tendency in some of this work is to interpret the nation as a set of common cultural or social practices. Consequently, though nearly every scholar who employs the term nation admits that it was a new social formation born of the diaspora, scholarship on the nation has been quite uneven in addressing the kinds of process-related research questions that lie at the heart of such an admission.

In Vassa's recounting of the workings of the slave trade from the Biafran interior to the coast, it is clear that practice itself was not culturally or socially definitive. According to Vassa Africans who apparently shared nearly identical practices might still consider themselves quite estranged from one another socially and culturally. In The Interesting Narrative, rather, being Eboe or African was less a set of common practices than it was a set of discourses and decisions about social practice. For Vassa a major part of being Eboe was the decision to identify as Eboe (an identity claimed by few if any in the eighteenth-century Biafran interior). More scholarship that examines just how such processes of identification unfolded, for Vassa and others, would help to infuse studies of national identity with much greater analytical robustness.

Lastly, the tendency to view the main substance of the nation as a set of common, African-derived practices has led many scholars to employ the concept of nation mainly as a prism through which to discern African cultural and social continuities in the Americas. Vassa's tentative and uncertain handling of Eboe, coupled with the fact that he and others came eventually to own as a collective identity a term that in the eighteenth-century Biafran interior was apparently more hurled in disgust than steadfastly embraced, indicates the nation could not have operated simply as the context in which African cultures reemerged in the Americas. The ways Eboe, country, and nation appear in The Interesting Narrative indicate that it is vitally necessary to ask another question of such terms: was not the nation also an expression of tremendous loss, despair, and disjunction?

Addressing this particular question will require scholars to more closely follow the implications flowing from the admission that the nation was a new social formation and thus turn greater attention to discerning the actual processes by which farmers, hunters, mothers, and sons—who may have known themselves as Enugu, Isoama, and Mbofia—came in the Americas to be called, and perhaps even to see themselves as, Eboe. In great part a focus on such processes requires a focus on the slave trade and the mechanics of enslavement. Such work will require
scholars to return with new questions to the preoccupations of some of slavery studies' earliest literature: abolitionist literature such as Vassa's that focused intensely on the terror and material conditions of the slave trade. Modern studies of the Atlantic slave trade have drawn down the horrors of enslavement. The most prolific students of the slave trade—cliometricians and business historians in the main—have been content to demonstrate by omission that "the evils of the trade," in the classic expression of the argument, "can be taken for granted as a point long since proven beyond dispute." Likewise historians of American slavery proper have been equally loathe to linger over the details and consequences of the violence of enslavement. For the better part of almost four decades, much of the scholarship has focused on the ways that enslaved Africans salvaged and reiterated important aspects of their former society and culture in the Americas. Vassa's case suggests, however, that some of the cultural forms and notions of African ethnicity that appear under a certain light to be proof of the connections that united American slaves to their African homelands also need to be understood as consequences of the violence and terror of their exile. Without giving due attention to the violence and the violent movements that all but defined every stage of the Atlantic slave trade, it will be impossible to fully understand what it meant to be Igbo in Vassa's eighteenth-century Atlantic world.40

The ways Vassa expressed his Igboness in The Interesting Narrative suggest that whether and how the Eboe nation actually related to "Old World realities" is not a settled matter, and that the history of African society and culture in the Atlantic world cannot be written unless serious attention is given to questions concerning the development, articulation, and substance of the kinds of social relations and ethnic consciousness expressed by terms such as nation and country. Neglecting the history and substance of slaves' consciousness of the nation, the details of when, how, where, and whether Africans and their descendants nurtured and articulated a certain ethnic or national consciousness, cannot help but produce an analytically flat and relatively ahistorical understanding of what it meant to be Igbo, or Nago, or Coromantee, or Congo, in particular times and in certain places across the Atlantic world.41

Fortunately, more and more students of Afro-America and the African diaspora are expressing an interest in how notions of self and ethnicity developed and were expressed historically across the Atlantic world.42 As the historiography of African slavery in the Atlantic world trends toward migration history, toward a deeper exploration of the cultural history of American slaves, and even more toward interpreting the substance and significance of ethnicity in the unfolding history of the Americas, such approaches will reap significant historiographical benefits. Especially as historians of European migration to the Americas begin to pay more attention to the development and articulation of various forms of European ethnic consciousness and practice, scholars can look forward to a wide-ranging cultural history of the Atlantic, in which it is possible to track and compare, for instance, the development of Scotch-Irish community and consciousness in mainland British North America alongside the development of Yoruba ethnic community and consciousness in Brazil.43 Vassa's Interesting Narrative promises to play an important role in the writing of such an Atlantic cultural history.
Alexander X. Byrd is an assistant professor of history at Rice University. He thanks the following for their helpful criticism of aspects and earlier versions of this article: Richard Blackett, Vincent Brown, Vincent Carretta, Edward L. Cox, Michael Gomez, Ira Gruber, Victor Manfredi, Philip Morgan, John Murrin, Colin Palmer, Claudio Saunt, Stephanie Smallwood, Kerry R. Ward, and the anonymous readers for the *William and Mary Quarterly*. For the opportunity to test some of the principal ideas contained in the piece, he is thankful to participants in the following forums: the University of Houston Black History Workshop, the Harvard University Atlantic History Workshop, the workshop of the Schomburg Scholars-in-Residence Program, the Rutgers University colloquium, "New Directions in the Study of Americas," the Ray Ginger Lecture in American History at Brandeis University, the conference on "African Influence on American Culture" at the University of Haifa, and the Association of Caribbean Historians/UNESCO workshop, "Conceptualizing Caribbean Migration and Diasporas." For support of the larger project of which this article is a part, he gratefully acknowledges the following: the ACLS/Andrew Mellon Fellowship for Junior Faculty, the SSRC International Migration Program, the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Paula and John Mosle Fund of the School of Humanities.

Notes


2 By asserting that Vassa was not African born, his eighteenth-century critics meant to change the light in which readers viewed the information in his book concerning slavery and the slave trade. In rebutting the charge, Vassa and his friends understood that the credibility of his testimony was very much at stake. See, for instance, J. Baker's letter in Equiano, *Interesting Narrative and other Writings*, 6–7; Carretta, "Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano," 227–29. On some of the interpretive consequences that might follow from Vassa being born in South Carolina, see Vincent Carretta, introduction to Equiano, *Interesting Narrative and other Writings*, xi (quotation); Carretta, "Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano," 235.


1 Equiano, Interesting Narrative and other Writings, 32, 37–38, 44. I am grateful to Jessica Herzogenrath for checking and, in several key instances, adding to my concordance of the terms Igbo, country, and nation in Interesting Narrative and other Writings.

2 Compare, for example, Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, 1st ed. (London, 1789), 2: 4–5; ibid., 2d ed. (London, 1789), 2: 4–5; ibid., 3d ed. (London, 1790), 3; ibid., 4th ed. (Dublin, Ireland, 1791), 3; ibid., 5th ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1792); ibid., 6th ed. (London, 1793), 3; ibid., 7th ed. (London, 1793), 3; ibid., 8th ed. (Norwich, Eng., 1794), 3; ibid., 9th ed. (London, 1794), 3. See also Equiano, Interesting Narrative and other Writings, 32, 241 n. 41. There can be little doubt that Vassa exercised significant oversight over the book. The publication history of Interesting Narrative—it was essentially self-published and self-marketed—offers ample evidence of the kind of hands-on approach Vassa took with his memoir (see James Green, “The Publishing History of Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative,” Slavery and Abolition 16, no. 3 [December 1995]: 362–75; Vincent Carretta, “Property of Author: Olaudah Equiano’s Place in the History of the Book,” in Genius in Bondage: Literature of the Early Black Atlantic, ed. Carretta and Philip Gould [Lexington, Ky., 2001], 130–50; Carretta, “A Note on the Text,” in Equiano, Interesting Narrative and other Writings, xxxi–xxxii). I am grateful to the interlibrary loan staffs at Fondren Library (Rice University) and Firestone Library (Princeton University), and to special collections staffs at the library of the University of Glasgow, the Langston Hughes Memorial Library (Lincoln University), and the Bancroft Library (University of California).

3 For Vassa’s use of Oye-Eboe, see Equiano, Interesting Narrative and other Writings, 38. It is possible that Vassa could have been trying to render oyibo, a term borrowed from the Yoruba oíbo, meaning stranger or foreigner (though later meaning white person or European), and linguistically unrelated to Igbo. Given Vassa’s orthography, however, I am inclined to agree with Chinua Achebe and Paul Edwards that it is more likely Vassa was making an attempt at onye Igbo, or Igbo person. Such a use aligns with the connotations with which the term Igbo was freighted in the eighteenth-century Biafran interior. (As will become clear, Igbo was also a term used to refer to foreigners.) See R. C. Abraham, Dictionary of Modern Yoruba (London, 1970), Oíbo (459); Kay Williamson, ed., G. W. Pearman, comp., Igbo-English Dictionary Based on the Onitsha Dialect (Benin City, Nigeria, 1972), oyibo (391), onye (379–80). A. E. Afigbo, G. I. Jones, Catherine Acholonu, and Paul Edwards have all wrestled with the meaning of Vassa’s Oye-Eboe (see Afigbo, Ropes of Sand, 168; Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo," 65; Acholonu, "Home of Olaudah Equiano," 354; Edwards, Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria 2: 401; Edwards, "From Introduction to The Life of Olaudah Equiano," in Sollors, Interesting Narrative, 309).


5 Equiano, Interesting Narrative and other Writings, 46, 52, 32.

6 Ibid., 172.

7 Ibid., 48. "In that part of the country (as well as ours)," wrote Vassa, "the houses and villages were skirted with woods, or shrubberies, and the bushes were so thick, that a man could readily conceal himself in them, so as to elude the strictest search" (48–49).
Ibid., 52–53 (quotation, 53). The chieftain to whom Equiano was initially enslaved was also a smith. In precolonial western Africa, the occupation of smith often implied certain political and ritual power as well. See, for instance, Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 140–41; George E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000–1630* (Boulder, Colo., 1993), 39–42.

Equiano, *Interesting Narrative and other Writings*, 51 [emphasis added].

Ibid., 53–54.

Ibid., 52–54. Vassa's use of country and nation to evoke distinct settlements or towns were clearest at the moments when he gave broad overviews of his travels, but they were also evident in sentiments he expressed when his ordeal landed him on the Atlantic coast, as when he pined for home when first forced aboard a European Guinea man: "Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country" (55). Given that Vassa's experience with and his descriptions of African slavery in the early chapters of *Interesting Narrative* were grounded in local experience, it is doubtful that "my own country" of the passage referred to any expansive unit of territory. It is more likely that Vassa as a man and Equiano as a boy had in mind his father's settlement and its environs. This understanding of country also seems to be operative during another moment on the coast when Equiano longed for home: "I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore" (56). "Sense of 'country,'" A. E. Afigbo has written, "was very narrow in pre-colonial Igbo land, so narrow that it could at times be limited to the village-group" (Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 150).

In this same memorial, Vassa refers to all Africans as his countrymen. "That your memorialist is desirous of returning to Africa as a missionary, if encouraged by your Lordship, in hopes of being able to prevail upon his countrymen to become Christians" (Equiano, *Interesting Narrative and other Writings*, 221 [quotation], 228, 231).

Ibid., 56.

Ibid.

Ibid., 57 [emphasis added].

Ibid., 60, 62.

Of all the ways Vassa employed country, perhaps the most confounding came from a description, in later editions of his memoir, of his purchasing slaves for a plantation on which he was to be an overseer: "I went with the Doctor on board a Guinea-man, to purchase some slaves to carry with us, and cultivate a plantation; and I chose them all of my own countrymen, some of whom came from Lybia" (ibid., 205). For an introduction to eighteenth-century nationalism, see Max Savelle, "Nationalism and Other Loyalties in the American Revolution," *American Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (July 1962): 901–23; E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), 14–45, esp. 17–24; Nicholas Hudson, "From 'Nation' to 'Race': The Origin of Racial Classification in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 247–64; Anna Neill, "Buccaneer Ethnography: Nature, Culture, and Nation in the Journals of William Dampier," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 165–80. For a quick sense of the possibilities of how country and nation were used in English, see *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.vv. country, nation.


Majesty's Government to the River Niger, in Africa by the River Niger, in the Steam-Vessels Quorra and Alburkah in repr., London, 1970); William Allen and T. R. H. Thomson, Frederick Schon and Mr. Samuel Crowther: Who, with the Sanction of Her Majesty's Government, term was known, it was not ordinarily embraced as a term of self-identification. See, in addition to that Igbo was a term unknown to some and known and used by others. But among those to whom the term at the littoral in the late seventeenth century (see P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law, eds., Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, London is among ourselves" (Baikie, "Brief Summary of an Exploring Trip Up the Rivers Kwóra and Chádda [or Benué] in 1854," Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London 25 [1855]: 111). I agree with A. E. Afigbo that Baikie was subject to overreach in his application and interpretation of Igbo (Afigbo, Igbo Genesis, 4–5). And it should also be pointed out that Baikie's gloss of Koelle was defective inasmuch as the author of Polyglotta Africana did not put such a fine point on the matter (Koelle did not argue that Igbo was a term learned from white men). Still Baikie was no doubt correct that the term Igbo was known and used in the Biafran interior. Jean Barbot and others encountered the term at the littoral in the late seventeenth century (see P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law, eds., Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712 [London, 1992], 2: 693–94, plate 53, plate 54, 702 n. 5). More revealing, however, is that when Baikie summarized his thoughts on Igbo as an ethnonym a year later—and after having benefited from interviewing people from the Biafran interior, then in Fernando Póo and Sierra Leone—he was more circumspect concerning how Igbo was used in the Biafran interior. In his 1856 monograph, for instance, Baikie conceded Koelle's point concerning the primacy of local identifications among people in the interior. Consequently, if he meant in his 1855 article to suggest that Igbo was a term of self-identification, in his subsequent monograph Baikie's thoughts on the matter were more reserved, even opaque. "In Igbo," wrote Baikie, "each person hails, as a sailor would say, from the particular district where he was born, but when away from home all are Igbos" (Baikie, Narrative of an Exploring Voyage Up the Rivers Kwóra and Bínue, Commonly Known as the Niger and Tsádda, in 1834 [1856; repr., London, 1966], 307 [emphasis added]). Baikie's explanation is a tautology, but a useful one inasmuch as it acknowledges (not unlike Koelle in its conclusions) that Igbo consciousness was a process, not a given.

22 Sigismund Wilhelm Koelle, Polyglotta Africana (1854; repr., Graz, Austria, 1963), 7–8. In reflections on his own journey on the Niger in 1854, William Balfour Baikie made a point of disagreeing with the German philologist, writing: "Here let me notice a conjecture of Koelle in his 'Polyglotta Africana,' namely, that I'bo is a name unknown to the natives, until they learn it from white men. This is quite erroneous, as the name I'bo or Igbo is as familiarly employed among the natives as London is among ourselves" (Baikie, "Brief Summary of an Exploring Trip Up the Rivers Kwóra and Chádda [or Benué] in 1854," Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London 25 [1855]: 111). I agree with A. E. Afigbo that Baikie was subject to overreach in his application and interpretation of Igbo (Afigbo, Igbo Genesis, 4–5). And it should also be pointed out that Baikie's gloss of Koelle was defective inasmuch as the author of Polyglotta Africana did not put such a fine point on the matter (Koelle did not argue that Igbo was a term learned from white men). Still Baikie was no doubt correct that the term Igbo was known and used in the Biafran interior. Jean Barbot and others encountered the term at the littoral in the late seventeenth century (see P. E. H. Hair, Adam Jones, and Robin Law, eds., Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712 [London, 1992], 2: 693–94, plate 53, plate 54, 702 n. 5). More revealing, however, is that when Baikie summarized his thoughts on Igbo as an ethnonym a year later—and after having benefited from interviewing people from the Biafran interior, then in Fernando Póo and Sierra Leone—he was more circumspect concerning how Igbo was used in the Biafran interior. In his 1856 monograph, for instance, Baikie conceded Koelle's point concerning the primacy of local identifications among people in the interior. Consequently, if he meant in his 1855 article to suggest that Igbo was a term of self-identification, in his subsequent monograph Baikie's thoughts on the matter were more reserved, even opaque. "In Igbo," wrote Baikie, "each person hails, as a sailor would say, from the particular district where he was born, but when away from home all are Igbos" (Baikie, Narrative of an Exploring Voyage Up the Rivers Kwóra and Bínue, Commonly Known as the Niger and Tsádda, in 1834 [1856; repr., London, 1966], 307 [emphasis added]). Baikie's explanation is a tautology, but a useful one inasmuch as it acknowledges (not unlike Koelle in its conclusions) that Igbo consciousness was a process, not a given.


24 C. W. Meek, "Comments by the Anthropological Officer on Mr. Jeffrey's Anthropological Report,"
Jan. 24, 1932 [37?], in CSE 1.86.228, National Archives of Nigeria (quotation). In parts of the Biafran interior, age-sets and age-grades were important units of social organization and authority—age-sets being comprised of the males of a village or village group within a two- or three-year age range, and an age-grade consisting of several contiguous age-sets. Age-sets and age-grades were assigned and/or performed particular civic functions; a senior age-grade may have served as the effective village governing council, a junior age-set may have been responsible for certain public works. An age-set, esp. as its members matured and distinguished themselves as a group, might take a particular name. See S. Ottenberg, "Improvement Associations among the Afikpo Ibo," *Africa* 25, no. 1 (January 1955): 2–4; G. I. Jones, "Ibo Age Organization, with Special Reference to the Cross River and North-Eastern Ibo," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 92, pt. 2 (July–December 1962): 191–211; Elizabeth Isichei, "Historical Change in an Ibo Polity: Asaba to 1885," *Journal of African History* 10, no. 3 (1969): 422–23; Anne Foner and David Kertzer, "Transitions over the Life Course: Lessons from Age-Set Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 5 (March 1978): 1081–104.


An examination of the term Igbo shows that it belongs to the same category that the following words do in English. Viz. Kafir, Heathen, Barbarian, Welsh. All of these terms used in English are, with the exception of Heathen, with alien roots in alien languages to signify foreigners: i.e. persons not of the same race or language as the speaker. It would seem that Igbo is from a Southern root which means bush or people of the bush and its analogue in English would be Heathen i.e. people of the heath. It is thus clear that, as there is no heathen race or nation per se, so actually there is no Igbo race or language at all—none of the peoples described today as [Igbo] by the European will admit the term as descriptive of his race or language and will use it of himself (Jeffreys, "Awka Division Intelligence Report," National Archives of Nigeria).

Equiano was kidnapped at an age (eleven years old or younger) when he would have only been just beginning to appreciate the substance and texture of his larger society. In this sense the restraint Vassa exercised in using Eboe in *Interesting Narrative* is quite remarkable. He certainly could have presented the term more decisively. He could have done more to mask his uncertainty about its meaning. That he did not is a sign of remarkable thoughtfulness.


20 According to Austin Shelton, for the peoples of the Biafran interior "the 'we' virtually always refer[s] to a tightly related consanguineous group extending its membership hesitantly and with numerous serious reservations affinally, usually within a non-exogamous village-group called a 'town' in English, and the 'they' refer[s] to all other peoples not of the consanguineous familial group, nor of the affinal and 'town' groups" (Shelton, Igbo-Igala Borderland, 28). See also Elizabeth Isichei, A History of African Societies to 1870 (Cambridge, 1997), 19.


23 See footnote 5 for Vassa's reconsideration, between the first and subsequent editions of his memoir, concerning whether the province in which he was apparently born should properly be called Eboe.

24 Vassa the man admitted that Equiano the boy had a necessarily tenuous understanding of the relationship between the part of the world he had come to know best as a boy and the part of the world, almost by definition, beyond a boy's comprehension. He freely admitted that his knowledge of the world beyond his homeland and his grasp of the relationship of his homeland to Benin was far from comprehensive, writing once, for example, that "every transaction of the government, as far as my slender observation extended, was conducted by the chiefs or elders of the place" (Equiano, Interesting Narrative and other Writings, 32 [emphasis added]). Even assuming a West African birth, it is still likely, as A. E. Afigbo and S. E. Ogude have pointed out, that a good deal of Vassa's information about life in the Biafran interior was as much reportage as it was recollection (Afigbo, Ropes of Sand, 149–51; Ogude, Research in African Literatures 13: 31–43).

25 This is an important point in Carretta's new biography of Vassa (Vincent Carretta, Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man [Athens, Ga., 2005]).

26 Throughout the book the depth and quality of Vassa's social interactions with Africans and Afro-Americans are more suggested than described (Equiano, Interesting Narrative and other Writings, 134, 38, 64). Around this apparent social and cultural lacuna has sprung a critical literature analyzing Vassa's African and British selves. See Susan M. Marren, "Between Slavery and Freedom: The Transgressive Self in Olaudah Equiano's Autobiography," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 108, no. 1 (January 1993): 94–105; Geraldine Murphy, "Olaudah Equiano,
American Institutional and Intellectual Life, 1Q trend is perhaps due for a correction. In places the centrality of violence to American slavery and the Atlantic slave trade is once again beginning to be reflected in the scholarship. For essays detailing why Early America: Overcoming Denial and Discovering the Gulag," in this shift in the historiography is necessary and beneficial, see Peter H. Wood, "Slave Labor Camps in African captives of their native resourcefulness—turning them into "a society of helpless no. I (April 1997): 3. Further, since Stanley Elkins argued that the shock of enslavement denuded Eltis and David Richardson, "The 'Numbers Game' and Routes to Slavery," Etel Vassa's expressed Igboness can be understood, in part though not in its entirety, as a critical and unfolding act of self-fashioning (Carretta, Slavery and Abolition 20: 96-105; Carretta, "Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano," 234-35; Sobel, "Migration and Collective Identities," 196).

28 This point is well understood by those grappling with the recent uncertainty concerning Vassa's birthplace. Vincent Carretta and Mechal Sobel suggest that it is worthwhile to consider the ways that Vassa's expressed Igboness can be understood, in part though not in its entirety, as a critical and unfolding act of self-fashioning (Carretta, Slavery and Abolition 20: 96-105; Carretta, "Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano," 234-35; Sobel, "Migration and Collective Identities," 196).

29 Thornton, Africa and Africans, 321. The nation, Thornton has argued, "was the locus for the maintenance of those elements of African culture that continued on American soil" (321).

25 The mainline cliometric and business history approach to the conditions of the slave trade can be gleaned in Philip D. Curtin, The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (Madison, Wis., 1969), xix; David Eltis and David Richardson, "The 'Numbers Game' and Routes to Slavery," Slavery and Abolition 18, no. 1 (April 1997): 3. Further, since Stanley Elkins argued that the shock of enslavement denuded African captives of their native resourcefulness—turning them into "a society of helpless dependents"—terror and violence, though they were central to the institution of slavery, have not figured prominently in its historiography. Rather, for the better part of almost four decades much of the scholarship has focused, contra Elkins, on the ways that enslaved Africans salvaged and reiterated important aspects of their former society and culture in the Americas (Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life, 3d ed. [Chicago, 1976], 93-103 [quotation, 98]). This long trend is perhaps due for a correction. In places the centrality of violence to American slavery and the Atlantic slave trade is once again beginning to be reflected in the scholarship. For essays detailing why this shift in the historiography is necessary and beneficial, see Peter H. Wood, "Slave Labor Camps in Early America: Overcoming Denial and Discovering the Gulag," in Inequality in Early America, ed.

41 Consequently, I disagree with how Michael Gomez once characterized the potential contribution of this kind of work (Gomez, *Radical History Review* 75: 118). "Africans," Gomez has written concerning South America's largest slave society, "were seen as members of varying nações, and whether the collective identity was imported from Africa or was assembled in Brazil is really a minor point" (113). If the nation was an important social and cultural idea, then surely coming to terms with where and how it came into existence and how it changed over time is a matter of prime importance. How to go about such research in the most profitable way is the only question that remains. Work by Brubaker and Cooper as well as Spear underlines the importance of taking a measured historical approach to analyzing expressions of African ethnicity, and the difficulty of doing analytically precise and useful work on questions of identity without first disaggregating the various meanings identity has come to encompass, and then analyzing one or several in particular (as opposed to forcing a term as ambiguous as identity to do work that requires greater analytic specificity). Research focused on the history of Vassa's Igboness—focused, that is, on how he came to understand himself as Igbo—would represent an attempt to address some of the concerns of Brubaker and Cooper and Spear. See Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2000): 1-47; Thomas Spear, "Neo-Traditionalism and the Limits of Invention in British Colonial Africa," *Journal of African History* 44, no. 1 (March 2003): 3-27.

